Bella Coola Indians - Chapter II

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The wife acquiesced. The chief then told one of the young commoners to sleep with her, and afterwards to tell a comrade to do likewise, who, in turn, would pass on the request so that it might reach each member of the party. Not only is it contrary to custom for a commoner to hold intercourse with a chief's wife, but it is unknown for a man to ask another to sleep with his wife, so the youth ~~man~~ was surprised and rather frightened. However, he acceded to the request, passed on the instructions, and washed. As he was bathing, a seal appeared in the surf beside him, and he was able to kill it easily. Each in turn behaved in the same manner, washed, and then killed a seal. Next morning, when the chief returned, he was delighted that all had turned out in accordance with his hopes. At the same time the wind dropped so that the party was able to return home.

The power which had brought the seals within reach of the men had been engendered in their own bodies by these ritual acts after a rather lengthy period of continence.

[redacted]ce. The Bella Coola believe that ~~such a procedure always~~ this ritual increases their strength and ability, thereby giving them a better chance to gain favour from supernatural beings, and to take advantage of opportunities offered. Hunters in particular are careful with regard to their marital life since animals know their acts and thoughts, and hide from one who has not made himself "clean" by sxetsta. ~~continence, its termination, and bathing. Sxetsta consists of these three elements, but since continence is the most prominent feature, the~~ term may be translated as "ceremonial chastity".

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In its simplest form this comprises merely the three elements already mentioned. The longer the continence, the greater the power engendered by its termination. A man who has practised abstinence for a year has such strength within himself that almost any good fortune may occur, and cases are known in which it has been carried out for even longer periods. More often, an individual practises ceremonial chastity in accordance with a family tradition. One old man gave the following recipe

cated belief is accepted without question by every Bella Coola, and plays an important part in their lives, even in their present degraded condition. The following story illustrates the point rather clearly.

A person planning to set out on an expedition for any purpose should remain continent for several nights to increase his generative powers. He then selects a time for beginning the rite and on the second and fourth nights from that date sleeps with his wife, holding intercourse repeatedly and vigorously until he is utterly exhausted. Before dawn on the third and fifth ~~nights~~ days he must wash in the river or in some quiet stream. Then follow four nights of restraint, a further intercourse, and washing before dawn. The period is next increased to eight nights, then twelve, and finally sixteen, each with a similar contact and bathing. ~~Thus~~ The nights of abstenance are thus forty in all, a lucky number. An unmarried man can obtain power in the same manner with the assistance of a female friend; it is the act itself that is vital, not the union of husband and wife.

At the present time, only two Bella Coola are said to know this particular type of ceremonial chastity, which they conceal carefully, even refusing offers to buy their knowledge. It is potent at any time, but especially if the periods of continence have been so arranged that they terminate at one of the solstices. Then, indeed, can a hunter set off with fair prospects of success, knowing that every human taint disliked by animals has been removed, and been replaced by a ceremonial cleanliness pleasing to them. If the time terminates at the winter solstice, the hunter should set out immediately; if it ends in June, he must remain away from

women after his final intercourse. In September or October, when ready to leave for the hunt, he must sleep beside his wife for the last four nights; each night he must place his leg between hers, and each nightx the two must wash together. The best fortune of all is obtained by a man who observes this forty night period for four successive years.

Another, and more common, count[1] is to observe continence for four nights, followed by ~~xxxixgxxxxxghxxxx~~ intercourse. Immediately afterwards, the man should eat as much devil's club[2] as possible, selecting small twigs from which the bark and spines have been rubbed off. This acts as an emetic, so that before washing in the morning he has vomited from his stomach all polluting matter, especially any human hair which animals consider particularly unclean. Before dawn he goes to the river and remains beneath the surface as long as possible, irrespective of the coldness of the water. Then he returns slowly to his house. Four nights later the same acts are repeated. These eight nights of continence are followed by two further periods, each of four nights, making a total of sixteen. Thus fortified, a hunter anticipates great success.

A person practising ceremonial chastity is in a condition peculiarly susceptible to disaster, and must observe certain restrictions. If, for example, anyone sees him as he returns from washing in the morning, the power which he has been accumulating so laboriously is lost. Owing to this belief, it is customary for a man to wash long before dawn and to come creeping into his house through a hole in the floor. He must always be the last to retire at night, the first to rise in the morning; and he must say nothing about what he is doing. Intercourse is, of course, absolutely forbidden except on the proper nights, and at other times he must not even put his arm around his wife. Failure to obey these restrictions destroys any advantage from ceremonial chastity, while actual disaster follows should a man's wife misconduct herself with anyone else when he is using her for this purpose. If

[1]The record of nights is kept by notches cut in a stick or by knots on a cord.
[2]Or False Hellebore. This plant is thought to be so poisonous that the eating of even a twig an inch in length is fatal; a very small amount, however, all that is ever taken, acts as a powerful emetic.

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she is unfaithful, her husband is certain to be slain by an animal when hunting, or to slip and be killed on a mountain trail. Animals know all that human beings do or think, and they punish anyone who is unable to perform ceremonial chastity fittingly. Behind these restrictions there is undoubtedly the sentiment that intercourse, held duly and properly at the right time, is not a mere desire of the flesh, but a ceremonial act. Indeed, when the Bella Coola speak of intercourse in connection with ceremonial chastity, they do not use the common term, s'm, which has a coarse implication, but xoldjut, which has a polite and almost sacred implication.

Ceremonial chastity is considered almost a necessity to hunters, and in former years a man would rarely, if ever, set out on to seek game without fortifying himself by at least several days of continence followed by washing. In the few cases known of a female assuming the clothing and activities of a male, she has been forced to hire a man to sleep with her on the proper nights before starting to hunt.

~~woman has assumed xxxxxx the clothing and activity of a man~~ female, she has been forced to hire a man to sleep with her on the proper nights before starting to hunt. But hunters are by no means the only ones to observe ceremonial chastity. If a man wants to build a salmon-weir, it is by this means that he makes himself strong enough to succeed; if he plays cards, good fortune is wooed in the same fashion. The guests at a potlatch observe ceremonial chastity that their host may not forget them in his distribution of presents, the host, that his guests may arrive on time. The kusiut dancer thus fortifies himself for the dangers of his performance. In this way a man experiences dreams foretelling the future. In every desire or activity of life, ceremonial chastity is a potent means of success, not infallible, usually combined with prayer and often with sacrifice, but a background and accompaniment to every means of propitiation. If a man has conspicuous ill-luck, it is because he has failed to observe ceremonial chastity; if he succeeds, it is because he has done so. At the present time there is living in the Bella Coola valley an old white man who for years has ranged the mountains in search of gold; he has been unsuccessful, and the Bella Coola believe that he will never succeed ~~unless~~ till he observes ceremonial chastity.

The strength which a man can acquire through ~~lengthy ceremonial chastity~~ the practice the observance of this rite is almost limitless. ~~A man~~ He may be ailing on account of the leaning of his Tally Post, but, if he energetically and faithfully observe chastity, it will become straight, whether automatically or through the agency of Älquntäm is ~~open to doubt~~ uncertain. After a long period of continence followed by intercourse, a man's spirit is so strong that his friends place their hands on the back of his neck in order to absorb some of the power radiating from his spirit. Ancient myths record how the mere force engendered in a man's body by lengthy ~~xxxx~~ abstenance was enough to kill an enemy, as if his spirit had been driven from his body by a sudden start. ~~And~~ Even in recent times it is said that individuals who have observed ceremonial chastity have been able to perform ~~feats~~ ~~xxx~~ miraculous feats. A few years ago a Bella Bella man lost two sons and was trying to get enough money to buy a tomb-stone for them. With this ~~xxx~~ in view, he observed chastity for almost a year. Then ~~xx~~ he went seal hunting, and had killed a large number when, standing up in his boat, the sail blew against him so that he was thrown

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overboard. But he was so strong that he ~~simply~~ walked on the surface of the water and reentered his boat, none the worse for his mishap. ~~My informant~~ The man who cited this instance stated that a number of Bella Bella had seen this incident and that there was no possible doubt of its ~~no~~ occurrence.

~~nuracy. occurrence.~~

~~This subject~~ ~~Ceremonial chastity is not a matter about which~~ The Bella Coola ~~are~~ do not willingly ~~to~~ talk about ceremonial chastity. It concerns ~~both~~ their religious and family life, in neither of which are strangers welcome. ~~But~~ Only when an investigator becomes on friendly terms, and gains some ~~begins to realize~~ understanding ~~ise~~ of the inner lives of the people, does he begin to realize its importance. Ceremonial chastity is not only potent in itself, but it is also the favorite means by which a man can ~~se~~ cleanse himself of the impurities of human existence so that he finds favor with the supernatural.